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ABSTRACT

The advocates for change in the elementary social studies curriculum have offered curriculum revisions without providing a convincing argument for content change. The advocates attack the "expanding environments" sequence, established in 1916 and still used today, and want to include an equal balance of history, economics, geography, and law-related and public issues in the curriculum, but the proposed alternatives including the 1983 National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Scope and Sequence have been largely ignored. One reason change has not occurred in the elementary classroom is because teachers have priorities in teaching reading and mathematics. Another reason is that textbook publishers see little reason to change a format that has worked for over 70 years and that they can "customize" to meet any special demands. Some suggestions that can improve content delivery in the elementary social studies curriculum are: (1) the clarification of goals for knowledge, skills, and attitude outcomes; (2) the re-examination of depth versus coverage; (3) the implementation of student motivation and child development research into instruction; and (4) the use of the whole language approach. Finally, textbook publishers and teachers should be included in any reform process in order to assure their support. (DJC)

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Elementary Social Studies: Throwing Out the Baby with the Bath Water?

by

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Elementary Social Studies: Throwing out the Baby with the Bath Water?

James E. Davis and Sharryl Davis Hawke

About every four years, critics of American education rally. Inspired by election campaign rhetoric, these critics declare open season on some aspect of our nation's education enterprise. This season's major prey is the social studies. Encouraged morally and supported in part by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, social studies critics purport public agreement on the following claims: 1) We don't teach enough solid content, especially history. 2) Kids don't know much history. 3) Textbooks, especially history textbooks, are bland and boring. 4) The social studies curriculum pattern, kindergarten through grade 12, needs major surgery and restructuring.

In this paper, our primary concern is the baby of the social student curriculum -- elementary social studies, grades kindergarten through 6. We address three questions: 1) What changes are being called for? 2) Do things need to be changed? 3) If change occurs, what are the implications?

What's Being Called For?

Before answering the question of this section directly, a bit of background is necessary. Social studies critics often fail to point out that there is no nationally mandated social studies curriculum. Local school districts, and about half our states which have authority to mandate curriculum content, are free to set their own social studies curriculum pattern. Yet, we do have a nationally accepted social studies curriculum -- and have had for over 70 years. In 1916, the Department of Interior's Bureau of

Education Committee on Social Studies recommended a social studies curriculum pattern that has endured. Called "expanding environments," the recommended elementary course sequence was, and basically still is, the following:

Kindergarten - Self, Home, School, and Community

Grade 1 - Families

Grade 2 - Neighborhoods

Grade 3 - Communities

Grade 4 - State History and Geographic Regions

Grade 5 - United States History

Grade 6 - World Cultures (Western or Eastern Hemispheres)

We need to remember that in the early 1900s significant numbers of immigrants were coming to America. At that time, very few students went to school beyond the ninth grade. The need then was to provide immigrants with an overview of United States society, to promote democratic citizenship, and to establish a broad-based general education for all students. The powerful influence of historians, the dominant group of social studies educators in 1916, led to a two-cycle pattern of social studies courses beyond grade six, with two years of American history and two years of world history/cultures. With few exceptions, the 1916-recommended K-12 school social studies curriculum pattern is in place today.

A History Monopoly? Given the dominant, enduring, K-12 70- year pattern, we wonder about the goals of the present critics, especially those who say we don't teach enough history. About half of elementary grade social

studies consists of history -- history of communities at grade three, state history at grade four, and U.S. history at grade five. In the past couple editions of first and second grade texts, we've seen more focus on history (of the Pilgrims and Indians variety). About two thirds of the grade 7 -12 curriculum is history. We wonder whether the critics want a complete monopoly for history to the exclusion of other disciplines concerned with the study of society? If so, to what end? We also wonder how their history push reconciles with developmental research which suggests that children's sense of chronology develops much later than the ages at which we currently begin history teaching.

Diane Ravitch, an articulate spokesperson for those who want to foster better quality and more history instruction in the public schools, attacks the expanding environments pattern at the elementary level this way:

> *So widespread is this pattern in American public schools that one might assume that this particular sequence represents the accumulated wisdom of generations of educational research. Teachers believe that this sequence is there because it has always been there. Those professionally responsible for developing curricula believe that this pattern rests on a foundation of cognitive and developmental research. In fact, these assumptions are not true. The present pattern in the early primary grades has not always been there; and it is not derived from research into child development or cognitive psychology. As far as I can tell, it is there because no one has questioned why it is there.*
>
> (Ravitch, Diane, "Tot Sociology or What Happened to History in the Grade Schools," The American Scholar, Summer 1987.)

From these and other remarks by Dr. Ravitch and her colleagues, the attack point is clear. As yet, we are not sure of the ultimate goal.

Other Change Advocates. The current historian-critics are not alone in their advocacy of change. However, the other change advocates are not nearly as vocal. Nor are they launching a full-scale, negative attack on the social

studies profession. Advocacy for social studies curriculum content change comes from many scholars and interest groups both in and out of education.

Those whose ties are with the discipline of economics want more than a tacit treatment of this subject in the curriculum. With support of the business community, organizations such as the Joint Council on Economic Education and Junior Achievement through extensive national networks, champion both the infusion of economics into the curriculum and the teaching of separate courses. The pressures to include economic education in the curriculum have resulted in over half the states mandating economics of some kind in the K-12 social studies pattern.

Recently, the geography profession has become more active. With financial support and leadership from the National Geographic Society, commitment from publishers of geography materials, and professional association blessing, geographic education -- at least on the surface -- is attempting to recover from its 15-year curricular doldrums.

The legal profession, working through local and state bar associations, advocates law-related education as part of civics and government courses. These efforts have resulted in the development of many curriculum materials and some significant gains in curriculum change.

There have always been champions of a strong social studies focus on enduring public issues. Many very thoughtful social studies educators continue to advocate that a major focus of the social studies should be to help students sort out, think through, and confront the policy choices related to public issues.

At this conference, we have heard some compelling arguments to include the newest thinking about the nature of social science knowledge, from both a national and a world perspective, in the curriculum. It is probably safe to conclude that as a profession, we are about two generations behind in the translation of new social science knowledge into the curriculum.

Why No Change? Despite the clamor for new and better substantive content, why has there been little, if any, change?

The way knowledge is delivered to teachers and students is well-established. In elementary social studies especially, the current handful of major publishers who publish K-6 series, and who invest about $6 million before a series is even considered for purchase, publish to clearly defined guidelines and adhere to rigorous and expensive adoption processes. In many cases the guidelines and processes are part of state law. In our major purchasing states (Texas, Florida, North Carolina, California), a K-6 series must pass muster at a state-level committee. If the series passes, publishers have a license to sell; there is no guarantee of sales success. Publishers must "work the territory," knowing that a major purchasing decision can hinge on the perceived attractiveness of the "bells and whistles" in the package rather than the quality of the substantive content. In the "open territory" states, the same core product is sold, but the bells and whistles may change.

Publishers operate with the confidence that the 70-year-old elementary social studies curriculum pattern is not likely to change. They have the basic materials available and can "customize" somewhat to meet special demands for a local or a state history. Thus, from the publishing perspective, the perspective which counts the most in the knowledge delivery business, there is no reason to

change. The knowledge delivery infrastructure is solidly in place and seemingly satisfies the consumer.

There are two other reasons why change in the elementary social studies content pattern has not taken place. First, elementary teachers have other priorities. The major priority at the primary level is reading. At the intermediate level reading continues to be important and mathematics becomes a close second priority.

Second, no one in social studies, regardless of their advocacy position, has made a convincing argument for content change. Nor has there been a motivating alternative presented. The 1983 NCSS Scope and Sequence and several proposed alternatives have been largely ignored. Most of the reformers of the 1960s and 70s, especially the knowledge providers and translators, did not attempt to reform curriculum organization. Now most of them have gone away. Factionalism -- "You do your thing; I'll do mine." -- seems to be an ongoing theme in our profession. Like a luxury car, the curriculum content core today has several fancy features -- a pinch of economics, a dab of law- related, a touch of global. We have convinced no one that an engine overhaul and a new transmission are needed. The state of California has produced a purportedly new history-centered History-Social Science Framework. Contrary to what state education agency people in California may tell us, the new framework is not sweeping the nation.

Do Things Need to be Changed?

To this question, we suspect that most in this room would reply with a resounding, "Yes!" If probed, the respondents may say their affirmative response is based on poor student performance, negative student attitudes

toward social studies, and the low value teachers put on social studies. We concur with these respondents. We have seen no new research to set aside the 1981 SPAN (Social Studies Priorities, Practices, and Needs) conclusions which stated that students do not have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are important outcomes of elementary social studies programs. Nor have we seen any evidence that elementary teachers see social studies as a priority curricular area.

The current, most vocal critics seem to want to "throw out the baby and the bath water." Is this approach merely a tactic to install a different hobby horse? To focus on expanding environments as the cause of poor student performance and attitude misdirects our attention. Expanding environments is now, as it was at its origin, an organizer for integrating the concepts and skills of the social sciences and history with the cognitive abilities and interests of students. A variety of emphases is possible within the expanding environments approach, as has been demonstrated over the past 70 years. Even when emphases on values education or self-concept development were in vogue, history continued to dominate the expanding environments curriculum pattern as the major academic discipline represented in both textbooks and actual classroom instruction.

We find it very difficult to accept the sleight-of-hand proposed by Ravitch:

> *History as a good story is <u>not a bad approach to take with children aged five, six, seven, and eight years.</u> (Emphasis ours.) History as an opportunity to exercise the imagination and live in another era is also a good approach for very young children. The proof of the pudding, as advocates of the new approach recognized fifty years ago, is that children enjoy it; they learn painlessly when their lively minds and their sense of romance and adventure are engaged. What is more, the kind of curriculum that predated expanding environments prepared children for the study of history and literature in the later grades.*

(Ravitch, op. cit.)

To state that something, whether it be history or some other subject, is "not a bad approach to take with children" is hardly a sound rationale for replacement of expanding environments. Actually, we are amazed at this kind of "scholarship," especially after Ravitch's pointed criticism of the social studies profession for not having a research base. Although alternatives are not thoroughly laid out in any one document, except perhaps the California Framework, the thrust of alternative proposals seems to focus on a history-centered curriculum with a heavy use of literature and primary history sources as the textual or reading material for the curriculum. Will such an approach correct the shortcomings of our current elementary social studies curriculum? Does it acknowledge the existence of other areas of social knowledge? Is it supported by the research on child development and learning?

To continue to pursue this line of counterattack seems to us a waste of time. Like two children in a neighborhood argument, we seem to be saying, "My knowledge (Daddy) is better than your knowledge (Daddy)." Neither the proponents of expanding environments nor the advocates of a history-centered curriculum has any research base to put forth. We propose a TRUCE! Let's be more thoughtful and less accusatory. Let's work together to examine what may be useful and helpful in thinking about what can contribute to change and improvement in elementary social studies.

We propose that we break out of our insular curriculum frame of reference and seriously examine five areas which we believe can improve the delivery of content in elementary social studies. These are: 1) goal setting, 2)

depth versus coverage, 3) student motivation, 4) child development, and 5) reading and whole language learning.

Goal Setting. Except when an elementary social studies series is being proposed by a major publisher, leaders and thinkers in our profession give little consideration to what a fifth or sixth grader should know or be able to do. (We say fifth or sixth grader because grade level organizational patterns are changing and many sixth graders are becoming part of middle schools in which they may begin more social science discipline- related study.) In general, upper elementary students achieve fairly well on recall-type tests. They are far less successful in the area of thinking skills. Ironically, students start out in the earliest grades liking social studies, but their dislike increases through the grades. Based on student outcomes we know about now, students apparently satisfy the low-level criteria of test makers, they do poorly in thinking skills, and we as educators generate little long-term interest on the part of students in our field. If satisfying test makers is our major goal, all is well. We think we have better goals. **We propose a truly collaborative effort among knowledge generators and translators and elementary curriculum leadership persons to clearly define social studies knowledge, skill, and attitude outcomes for the elementary school "graduate."**

Depth Versus Coverage. No one questions the fact of the knowledge explosion, an explosion which in part prompted the "new social studies" movement and which continues unabated. In the face of the continuing explosion, we persevere in a commitment to coverage. We submit that the "coverage" mentality exists regardless of social studies subject area -- history, government, or the study of families or communities. Coverage means that we convey bits and pieces of stuff, rarely imparting much useful knowledge. We

agree with Fred Newmann that we have "an addiction to coverage." We also agree that our addiction "reinforces habits of mindlessness." **In connection with setting goals, a major challenge to recovering from the coverage addiction is to decide how crucial areas of substantive content are to fostering later student learning. We also need to figure out how to allocate sufficient teaching and learning time to assure student comprehension and genuine skill development. Work being done by child development researchers can be helpful in this planning.**

Student Motivation. In the face of declining student interest in social studies through the grades, we see promise in research on strategies for motivating students to learn. That research has examined potentially promising dimensions of motivation such as development of meaningful learning objectives, designing programs to assure success, providing opportunities for students to respond actively, and minimizing student performance anxiety. The claim by those engaged in student motivation research is that motivation can be developed in children by teachers through the use of motivational strategies which are an integral part of curriculum and instruction in a subject area. **In addition to content reconsideration and goal setting, we urge serious consideration of how student motivation research applies directly to elementary (and secondary) social studies instruction.**

Child Development. Across the corridor in the schools of education the child development/learning theory researchers are amassing information which could be considerable help to social studies professionals. Although their research is, for the most part, not directed to social studies (or to other content areas), the implications for their research in content areas are significant. Some examples of well-acknowledged research findings are the following:

•The works of Piaget and Bloom are still considered basically accurate and a sound base for understanding's children's learning development.

•When content and process are taught together, learning is maximized.

•Children learn better when they are engaged in activities and allowed to use their own powers to analyze.

•When memory demands are too great, students tune out.

Some of the people working in these areas are putting together--and researching--frameworks or theories based on their research findings. Two of particular interest for social studies are John Flavell's work on "strategic thinking" in which he deals with attacking problems (new content) from specific rather than random approaches. For example, if teaching immigration, rather than giving students examples of immigration to the United States from ten different homelands or time periods, Flavell would recommend doing an in-depth unit on some dimension of immigration to which students could relate (e.g. homesteading in Colorado). This in-depth study would provide the conceptual foundation for students to use in developing a more complete understanding of immigration later. Flavell's work provides a clear challenge to our persistence in coverage, even at the primary levels.

Another researcher's work to whom social studies educators should attend is Annemarie Palincsar. She has focused on teaching strategies to improve conceptual learning and emphasizes four strategies.

•Developing students' ability to ask good questions by providing them feedback on the questions .

•Developing students' recognition of ambiguity in what they are learning and their resourcefulness in clarifying that ambiguity (including seeking information from each other when appropriate).

•Developing students' ability to summarize.

•Developing students' predictive abilities.

None of these findings are startlingly new, but they are better researched than ever before. Tragically in social studies we act as if they did not exist. **We recommend that any serious attempt to "reform" social studies should begin with what is known about our client group.**

Reading and Whole Language. We in social studies have been a bit skiddish about elementary instruction, particularly in the primary grades, because it has been so reading dominated. For the past 15 plus years, reading has been a phoenics/language parts approach. Instruction has been quite technical and broken down into small, supposedly manageable steps. Although a couple of past elementary social studies series tried to connect with the phoenics approach through subsections in the teacher's guide, for the most part we have avoided intruding on the reading turf.

There's a revolution going on in reading. Although it has been festering for several years, the revolt is in full-swing at the moment. The revolution makes the process-content battles in social studies look mild. Three sides are clearly drawn:

Bottom Up Reading--phonics/language parts

Top Down Reading--language experience or whole language

Interactive Reading--a combination of the two approaches

Although we would personally stop short of a hearty endorsement of the whole language approach, for social studies it opens a door which phoenics has kept closed. A basic premise of whole language is using "natural" as opposed to "artifical" language experiences as the basis for language learning. By teaching students to read as they engage in everyday speaking, reading, and writing activities, whole language advocates believe students develop both motivation and skill.

A leading proponent of this approach is Ken Goodman from the University of Arizona. The classroom implications of whole language include, according to him, eliminating reading texts which slice reading into carefully controlled levels, throwing out workbooks which ask kids to dissect reading, providing content which is worth reading rather than content with controlled vocabulary, taking advantage of writing experiences students generate, and creating a climate in which students' "talk" is valued.

Just how wide whole language is opening the door for more (and better) social studies instruction is evident when Goodman describes the ideal whole language classroom as having features including:

- Centers in which students write charts for rules, attendance, and jobs
- A gallery of biographies about and by the children
- Charts and bulletin boards which are open-ended so students can add to them
- Opportunities for students to create stores with boxes, cartons, and

signs

•Times when children are encourage students to dictate stories or experiences

Classrooms with this type of activity and climate offer the best possible opportunity for social studies learning. Because many elementary teachers seem comfortable with the language experience approach to reading, a similar approach to social studies may create new interest in and enthusiasm for our subject area. **We recommend that social studies educators take a new look at the natural connections between social studies and the whole language approach to reading.**

Implications--Baby? Bathwater? Both?

In this presentation we have touched on three possible scenarios for elementary social studies in coming years. We conclude with some implications for each of those scenarios.

What if we adopted a history-dominated curriculum, ala the California Framework? Two outcomes seem likely.

(l) We would have another curriculum organization without a research base, without a carefully integrated rationale, and some would say without any clear motivation for teachers or publishers to make the change.

(2) We would continue the struggle between the expanding environments forces and history-centered curriculum forces--only now the history-centered people would be on the defensive.

What will happen if we continue the unspoken posture that, "Oh well they're little kids with reading-trained teachers, so what can we do?" Nothing different will happen in this scenario. Publishers will continue to be the major deliverers of social studies curriculum. They will respond to what they perceive as needs or improvements by creating different bells and whistles, but the momentum of the 70-year-old tradition and delivery system will keep elementary social studies rolling along.

What will happen if we attempt to plan and realistically work toward change? Unless we can pull together as a profession, probably nothing will happen in this scenario either. However, if we do decide to put improvement of elementary social studies high on our list of priorities, we would recommend the following steps:

•Compile and synthesize the research that currently exists on child development and student learning. Tease out of this research implications for social studies instruction.

•Address unknowns from the research with new research studies, carefully designed to plug up the holes. Included in the new research should be studies on alternative curricular organizations.

•Build a support base for the research-based changes among publishers by including them in the research process. Acknowledge that they are the major deliverers of curriculum to the elementary classroom and include them in the process of reform.

•Simultaneously, build a support base for change among practicing teachers and teacher educators. Publishers will deliver the tools of change--but only if there is a perceived interest in the marketplace.

We are suggesting that useful reform can only happen when we have some real knowledge of a better direction to take and when we form alliances with the publishers who will deliver the changes and teachers who will implement them. Without research and alliances, any reform efforts in elementary social studies will either leave the baby whimpering in cold water or, worse yet, kill it. Current elementary social studies may not be a very pretty baby, but it is alive and can be nurtured into an attractive adult.

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